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Richard C. Kane

Translator: Juliette Paquereau

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Earth, Water, and Fire: Elemental Representations of Feminist Force In Stories by John Cheever, T. Coraghessan Boyle, and Tobias Wolff

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1 In one of his letters John Cheever writes:

> I stake my tomatoes lightly. I feel that the tomatoe [*sic*] is basically a vine, disorderly and random. Me too.(345)

2 The image of unruly tomatoes can easily serve as a metaphor for a number of Cheever's suburban protagonists, essentially domestic but yearning to be wild. The same image also seems applicable to the author's own life which gave all the appearance of normalcy and order, but--as the posthumous journals and letters have revealed--had many random moments as it frequently deviated from the rigid dictates of conventional society.[1] I would like to take the trope even one step further and use it as an argument against the rigid classification of not only Cheever's entire body of writing but that of two younger authors who have both acknowledged his influence: T. Coraghessan Boyle and Tobias Wolff.[2] All three writers are perhaps best known for works focusing on the adventures and troubles of male protagonists such as: Cheever's "The Swimmer," "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill," "The Country Husband"; Boyle's "Greasy Lake," "The Fog Man," *Water Music*, *East is East*, *The Road toWellville;* and Wolff's "Smokers," "Hunters in the Snow," *The Barracks Thief*, and *This Boy's Life*. The particular "unruly tomatoes" that pop up in the literature of each of these authors, who have not been especially celebrated for their strong women characters, are a number of works that nevertheless employ techniques and strategies expressing strong feminist themes.

3 All three writers have to some degree been attacked from a feminist perspective. In both his life and his art Cheever sometimes offers an easy target for feminist criticism, such as his 1963 story "An Educated American Woman," which portrays a mother whose child dies when she neglects her family for community activities. So too biographer Scott Donaldson writes that the author "viewed his wife's [teaching] career with scorn and resentment"(197). And Lawrence Dessner accuses the author of marginalizing the wife of "The Country Husband." David Stanton has commented on the stereotypical nature of some of Boyle's women characters(49), while Craig Seligman reacts to Boyle's "pugnacious macho streak" that sometimes causes him to "buy into" the struggle to dominate that his work delineates (45). Michael Walker also critiques the male power struggle in "Greasy Lake," a story he feels ultimately displays a "failure of moral nerve"(247). Sinning mostly by omission in works about his own troubled youth or his later military experiences during or after the Viet Nam War, Tobias Wolff is lightly taken to task by Marilyn Wesley for writing fiction that "is mostly about men but appreciates women"(322).

4 On the other hand, besides the stories under consideration in this paper a number of other works might find a positive reception among feminist critics. Laura Driscoll, the heroine of Cheever's early story called "Expelled," Kate Dressner in "The Bella Lingua," and Honora Wapshot in *The Wapshot Chronicle* all refute the charge that Cheever's fiction never portrays strong intelligent women characters. In two of Boyle's more recent stories women weakened by age or circumstance rise up against oppressive male antagonists. In "My Widow" a declining octogenarian with the help of her athletic young neighbor manages to subdue an unsavory con man who has come to rob her. In the eerily prophetic "The Friendly Skies" an unusually timid elementary school teacher proves to be the only airplane passenger who finally overcomes an obnoxious bully who terrorizes the rest of the travelers and crew in several eruptions of air rage. And in Boyle's turn-of-the-century novel, *Riven Rock*, another strong central character is based on Katherine Dexter McCormick, the first female graduate in the sciences of MIT and a leader in the budding Women's Movement. Finally, as James Hannah has pointed out, Tobias Wolff's short stories "Desert Breakdown, 1968" and "Face to Face" both describe relationships "in which the woman triumphs and the man is defeated"(77).

5 To reinforce the implications of these more positive interpretations, I would like to examine three stories that not only feminist critics but all readers might respond to more favorably. Such an analysis might support the words of Southern writer, Reynolds Price:

> The most beautiful and fragile of our birth gifts is an entire humanity, an accessibility to all other members of our species--all shades of gender and private need. The gift lies not primarily in our sexuality but in something simpler and more complex--an early comprehension of the means of human life, packed as they are so lovably, transparently, delicately, frighteningly in bodies and minds called male and female but deeply kin. It's in our power--writers and readers--to take the next step, back and forward, to a common gift: our mutual room.(20)

6 By exploring in depth three modern American stories, we might discover that their male authors and some of their major female characters have earned admission to this "mutual room."

7 One such character might be the female antagonist depicted in John Cheever's story, "The Five-Forty-Eight." The protagonist of this story is an insensitive boss who sleeps with his secretary one night and then fires her the next day because he doesn't want any messy

affairs cluttering up either his office or the tidy patterns of his comfortable existence. The main story line takes place six months after the episode when the still unemployed secretary waits for the boss one evening after work and then follows him home as he tries to elude her, believing she is bent on some form of revenge. The boss named Blake neither thinks of the secretary's pursuit as a particularly "feminist" type of retribution nor of his former actions as "sexual harassment" for which she is now "stalking" him because during the story's setting of the 1950's none of these three terms had yet exploded into the forefront of public consciousness. But a contemporary reader might well use a few of these charged phrases to describe some of the main outlines of the plot, whose present tense is punctuated by a series of revealing flashbacks that help explain the secretary's motivation. Meanwhile the suspense of the present line of rising action is intensified when Blake learns that the secretary has concealed a revolver in her large handbag.

8 The story is thematically constructed around a central tension between order and chaos reinforced through symbolic images of form and formlessness. The main symbol of order–at least a rigid superficial order–is Blake himself, who in his neat business suit recognizes the "existence of sumptuary laws" and "except for the few bright threads in his necktie, there was a scrupulous lack of color in his clothing that seemed protective" (284). Even Blake's body language sometimes suggests a rigid persona: at one point he "straightened his back and braced his shoulders" (287).

9 In contrast the secretary, who has suffered from a history of mental instability and poor health, becomes the principal symbol of disorder. Her very name–Miss Dent–suggests something damaged or imperfect, qualities hinted at during her job interview when the fastidious Blake notices "one of her stockings was crooked" (282) while later in the story he focuses on "a formless black hat" (286). During his one brief visit to the cramped room where she lived, Blake was reminded of "a closet. There were suit boxes and hatboxes piled in a corner" (283). He also noticed a note with her handwriting, whose messy, jagged form "looked like the marks of a claw" (289). Miss Dent's sloppy handwriting gave Blake "the feeling that she had been the victim of some inner–some emotional–conflict that had in its violence broken the continuity of the lines she was able to make on paper" (283). Later Blake regrets that he didn't see this claw-like handwriting as a foreshadowing of potential danger because now his neat, tidy existence is threatened by the intrusive Miss Dent, who may mar the smooth façade of his well organized world just as he has "dented" or damaged her life both financially and psychologically.

10 The fact that at first Blake cannot even remember the secretary's name suggests that as an individual woman with personal feelings and problems she never really existed for him at all. Indeed, we learn that Miss Dent was only one in a series of passive, vulnerable female victims specially targeted because Blake knew his advances would meet little resistance or reprisal. Blake's involvement in these affairs whose potential messiness he tries to keep in check does not seem to be deterred by the fact that he is a married man with children. Blake's two different "social spheres" are reinforced geographically: he works in New York City but he and his family live in Shady Hill, the archetypal suburbia featured in a number of Cheever's stories. The commuter train which carries Blake back and forth between these two sectors of his life thus forms a vital link needed to keep both of these realms in tact yet conveniently distinct from each other: the big sprawling city where extramarital affairs can be conducted discretely is nicely distanced from the cozy upper class neighborhood where family life coats his existence with a veneer of

respectability. Blake likes to connect the two halves of his bifurcated world with the express train, another perfect symbol of order for the man himself who wants his life to be as efficient and streamlined as the fast-moving engine. But on this night as he walks to the train station, he makes two stops in an effort to lose Miss Dent: first a bakery with separate doors leading into different streets, then a gentleman's bar. After drinking two Gibsons, he forgets the coffee ring he has just purchased at the bakery, suggesting that the determined secretary is already beginning to make a ripple–if not a dent–in his consciousness. We are then told that Blake "was not a man who forgot things. This lapse of memory [about the coffee ring] pained him"(284)–if not his earlier lapse of memory about the name of the woman whose life he may have ruined.

11 Because of these two delays in his normal routine, Blake misses the express and instead must take the five-forty-eight, the local train whose progress is constantly interrupted by the many stops it must make along the way, just as Blake fears Miss Dent may try to interrupt his steady progress toward his nightly destination. Even before she makes her sudden appearance on the five-forty-eight, Miss Dent is already symbolically linked to the messy local train that surrounds Blake with earthy smells and other unpleasant sensations. In the rainy damp weather with all the passengers coming on and off the train in soggy overcoats and hats and with the "rank pipe and cigarette smoke" that begins to rise behind upheld newspapers, the train's old coach smelled "oddly like a bomb shelter in which whole families had spent the night" (286). The five-forty-eight passes through various dark, desolate areas near the river, where "a ramshackle boat club seemed to have been nailed together out of scraps of wood that had been washed up on the shore" (289). The dank atmosphere of the train, the ramshackle boat club, and the dirty slum areas he sees outside the filthy, streaked windows of the five-forty-eight--all "reminded Blake vaguely of the woman who had followed him" (286). But in spite of his unpleasant surroundings, during the early part of his journey, Blake feels that he has successfully evaded Miss Dent and that he is "on a safe path" (286).

12 The entire story is told in third person from Blake's point of view. This choice of a single-character perspective is thematically appropriate because it dramatically illustrates his egocentric vision: for chauvinistic Blake, his point of view is the only one that matters. He cares very little about what his former secretary is thinking or feeling. In her apartment even though she cried when he dressed to leave "an hour or so" after he had coupled with her, "he felt too contented and warm and sleepy to worry much about her tears" (283). Now she represents only an interruption to his train schedule and a possible threat to the normal routines of his life.

13 The sustained single-character perspective also reveals Blake's rigid categorical mind that is constantly trying to order the world through his narrow outlook. On a normal evening he usually "classifies" fellow passengers on the train as "rich, poor, brilliant, or dull, neighbors or strangers" (287). But on this night his categories start blurring as neighbors prove to be less than neighborly and friends behave more like strangers. For instance, when he sees his next door neighbor, Mrs. Compton, on the train, she at first presents him with a formal smile but the "smile died swiftly and horribly" (284). Mrs. Compton has become his wife Louise's confidant and he believes the vanishing smile resulted from his wife's latest account of his recent quarrel with her, where after work one evening he punished her for not having dinner ready on time by refusing to speak to her for two weeks. For this man controlled by train schedules, dinner schedules, and now conversation schedules, the calendar where he charts out the two-week period of silence

as his wife weeps in protest becomes another symbol of his rigid, compartmental mind, as does the locked bookcase that he constructed in the doorway between their separate bedrooms over nine years ago. After all, the charming wife he once married had long ago begun to lose her form: "Now the lines in her face were ineradicable, and when she clapped her glasses onto her nose to read the evening paper she looked to him like an unpleasant stranger" (285).

14 Mr. Watkins, a second neighbor on the train, might as well be a stranger also because he doesn't even acknowledge Blake, who disapproves of Watkins because he lives in a "sloppy, rented house," has "long, dirty hair," and wears a corduroy jacket and sandals to the office(285), decidedly inappropriate attire for the Madison Avenue of the 1950's. Blake had quarreled with Mr. Watkins because Blake's son Charlie had bonded so closely to the Watkin's boy that he started living in their house for a number of days and Blake felt that the "friendship had affected [his son's] manners and neatness" (285). Thus although Blake tries to put people into neat cubbyholes, messy reality upsets these compartments as wives become strangers and friends turn into enemies.

15 When Blake first sees the lights of Shady Hill, he again thinks in terms of categories and schedules. The lights remind him of the nightly suburban rituals: "It was time to go home, time for a drink, time for love, time for supper" (292). But the reader soon realizes that most of the love has actually disappeared from both his home and his neighborhood and the "golden grail" at the end of this nightly journey on a commuter train has become quite tarnished over the years, a suburban ideal characterized by form but lacking any real substance. This illusion of suburbia is foreshadowed by the domestic tableau Blake had gazed upon in a furniture store window when earlier he had been trying to avoid Miss Dent: "There were cups on the coffee table, magazines to read, and flowers in the vases, but the flowers were dead and the cups were empty and the guests had not come" (280-281). Thus as the story progresses, the pervasive order-chaos dichotomy itself begins to dissolve as the reader slowly realizes that Blake's iron-clad patterns, routines, and categories are used to mask fundamental disruption in the basic nature of his existence.

16 But what about Miss Dent? Despite her eight months in the hospital, her mental instability, her unemployment, and her generally chaotic life, the reader tends to believe her when she says to Blake (after she finally appears on the five-forty-eight), "I know more about love than you"(293). Although she places the muzzle of the gun against his belly as she sits next to him, she says she does not want to kill him and will use the gun only if he forces her to. For now she just wants to talk to him. She says, "I have been very sick again but I'm going to be better. It's going to make me better to talk with you" (289). In spite of her subsequent ramblings, the reader begins to believe that growth and health are possibilities for Miss Dent. That cramped apartment, after all, contained a piano with sheets of Beethoven sonatas that suggest an artistic, classical side to her nature. Her creativity may blossom more fully, just like the rose she at first offered Blake in the office, a flower which he quickly discarded in a trash can just as he discarded the blossom of her womanhood. But she may bloom again once she deals with Blake. She feels the profound need for some primitive ritual of retribution although she does not seem certain about what form it will take. She receives her inspiration after the train stops and they stand at the rainy Shady Hill station as the rest of the suburbanites depart for their warm, safe homes.

17 Besides chaos and disorder, Miss Dent has also been associated with darkness. When Blake first saw her, he thought of her as a "dark woman...her hair was dark, her eyes were

dark: she left him with an...impression of darkness" (282). The darkness perhaps suggests that unknown quality, the mystery that even the categorical Blake is never really able to pin down. On the train she was associated with the "dark river" that runs through the city, and now at this train station she says, "Let's get out of the light. Go over there" (292). As she leads him to a darker section of the train station, Blake sees--but does not recognize as his counterpart--a rat, which drags a paper bag into a culvert (293). But perhaps Miss Dent makes the connection because she now takes absolute control of the situation, orders Blake to kneel down, and then repeats three times in an incremental, ritualistic fashion: "Put your face in the dirt. Put your face in the dirt. Do what I say. Put your face in the dirt" (294). Weeping, Blake then falls on his face into the "filth" of the ground. Thus this seriously wronged woman uses the dirt of the earth to enact a primitive ritual of retribution as a way of beginning to restore order to her fragmented life.

18 She humiliates him by physically rubbing his face in the dirt–just as he had humiliated her by figuratively rubbing her face in the dirt earlier in the story. But for Miss Dent it is the dirt that cleanses, for as she says, "Now I can wash my hands of you, I can wash my hands of all this, because you see there is some kindness, some saneness in me that I can find again and use. I can wash my hands" (294). On the train Miss Dent had talked about exterminating devils and indeed Blake has become a type of demonic obsession for her, but now she can move beyond him in what started out as a form of feminist revenge but has blossomed into a ceremonial act of exorcism.

19 Miss Dent therefore becomes a dynamic character for whom the possibility of growth is suggested as she quickly walks away from Blake after she has completed her creative ritual. But has this dramatic interruption of his normal routine really changed Blake? Just like his "protectively" neutral clothing (284), the choice of a weak, vulnerable victim that "promised to protect him from any consequences"(283), and the "safe path" (286) that he tried to find on his nightly ride home, here too Miss Dent's distant retreating footsteps that he hears on the railroad platform as he raises himself "out of the dust" of the earth inform him that he is "safe" (294). His own security in his tightly structured world has been his chief concern all along. Unlike the dynamic Miss Dent, Blake remains a static character who restores a superficial order to his businessman's attire by simply picking up his hat from the ground and walking to his "happy home" in Shady Hill.

20 Although one critic feels "the story in its telling is non-judgmental," he also believes "the fact that the victim is finally able to confront and punish her boss on her own terms seems to speak for itself"(O'Hara,49). Indeed, "The Five-Forty-Eight" is decidedly feminist in its outcome because even though technically the point of view belongs to Blake, the author forms a sympathetic alliance with Miss Dent as the story's technique unrelentingly demonstrates to the reader the selfish chauvinism of its predatory protagonist.

21 Although T. Coraghessan Boyle studied under John Cheever in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, his body of work has reached out into further and more exotic parts of the world than Cheever's typical settings as in the African jungle in *Water Music* and into earlier historic periods as in his satire on the turn-of-the-century health-food craze in *The Road to Wellville.* But his short story "Sinking House" does focus on a suburban landscape where respectability and property values are of primary importance--at least, to most of the residents. However, Boyle's neighborhood is found not in the suburbs of New York, but on the West Coast in one of the sprawling communities of Los Angeles. And the

setting--peppered with references to C.D.'s, burritos, and pastel Reeboks--is much more contemporary than that of "The Five-Forty-Eight."

22 But just as Cheever's story revolved around two different worlds and the commuter train that connected them, so too does Boyle's tale examine two distinct realms, located this time on the same street by next-door neighbors. In "Sinking House" the chaos and disintegration of the structure in the story's title is threatening the order, routine, and very foundation of the second dwelling. The principal cause of all this disruption is the elderly Muriel Burgess, who immediately upon her husband's death performs a rather unusual act. She slowly moves about her house turning on all the faucets--in the kitchen and bathroom sinks, in the tubs and showers in the guest bathroom and the master bathroom. She even flushes a toilet and pins down the float with a brick. In the course of the afternoon she trudges outside and follows suit with all the sprinklers in the backyard. After all the taps, sprinklers, and toilets are flowing, hissing, or gurgling, she shows little inclination of turning them off again. Meanwhile during the next two weeks the seeping water begins to invade the domain of her young neighbors, Meg and Sonny Terwilliger.

23 Superficially the plot thus traces the conflict this situation inevitably causes between the two sets of neighbors. But the author's skillful use of a dual-character point-of-view reinforces the more important plot development, which is the mysterious merging of the perspectives of the two housewives. In spite of some humor and irony in the story, a more serious, almost mystical understanding between the two women develops and helps refute those critics who see Boyle only as a heartless commentator on human weakness whose "prolific pen" usually writes "in satirical overdrive" (Moore,9). As the story progresses, the anonymous third-person narrator alternates between the inner thoughts of the two women, who on the surface are so different from each other in age, appearance, and behavior.

24 A casual observer might conclude that Muriel Burgess has given up on any attempt to lead a meaningful existence as, almost in a stupor, she sloshes about her soggy abode in an old shapeless house dress as unopened sympathy cards pile up on her kitchen table. Her splayed feet, swollen arms, and protruding mid-section all suggest she has also lost interest in maintaining the form of her body as well as that of her house. Although Richard Eder sees the flowing water as an expression of loneliness or grief (3) while Michiko Kakutani reads it as merely the behavior of a "madwoman" (C18), a series of flashbacks soon suggest a different motivation, somewhat irrational perhaps but not without psychological explanation. Before long, we read that a young police officer who responds to the neighbors' complaint reminds Muriel of Monty, her deceased husband, "that is.... the Monty of fifty years ago....the Monty who'd opened up the world to her over the shift lever of his Model-A Ford"(455). But the flashbacks also reveal that Monty gradually changed until he became the "crabbed and abrasive old man who called her bonehead and dildo and cuffed her like a dog"(455). A lifetime of both verbal and physical abuse stops suddenly when the elderly Monty suffers a stroke and becomes an invalid who needs to be fed Gerbers' babyfood and whose bedpan needs to be emptied. While many wives might despair at this sudden turn of events, Muriel felt "almost glad" because she knew her torment had ended: "Fifty years. No more drunken rages, no more pans flung against the wall, never again his sour flesh pressed to hers. She was on top now"(455). She is on top even more when the abusive husband dies and the reader gradually realizes that the streaming water represents something far different than grief or mourning. Throughout the story the author's imaginative use of imagery and

symbolism will elucidate that different motivation, but meanwhile the author begins to examine how the spreading water is affecting the next-door neighbors.

25 If the wrinkled Muriel Burgess seems adrift in her sinking house, the smooth-skinned Meg Terwilliger is tightly anchored to a life of purposeful activity and routine. Instead of Muriel's baggy housedress, Meg wears Fila sweats and a new pair of Nikes (457). Unlike Muriel's indifference to her formless body, Meg keeps limber and trim by doing stretching exercises on the prayer rug in her sunroom, suggesting perhaps that the body has superseded the soul at the altar of the materialistic culture at which Meg like any good Yuppie worships. If Muriel seems to float about aimlessly, Meg appears to be thoroughly grounded to a rigid schedule. After her stretching exercises she will embark upon the following agenda: "pick up [her daughter] Tiffany at nursery school, drop off the dog at the veterinarian's, take Sonny's shirt to the cleaner's, buy a pound of thresher shark, cilantro, and flour tortillas at the market, and start the burritos for supper"(449). Trendy food, trendy brand-name clothing, a hip new C.D. by Sandee and the Sharks thumping out on the stereo in the sunroom--Meg Terwilliger's life seems rich and complete. But does the homonym formed by the first initials of her name--"M. T."--give the lie to the full life she thinks she is leading? It is while she is doing those stretching exercises that she first notices the dampness on the rug beneath her.

26 In his stylish haircut and gold chain, Meg's husband Sonny is even more concerned about form and order than is his wife. He is especially obsessive about his job in real estate. And when a settlement goes wrong or some other unforeseen event occurs, "These occasions always took him by surprise. He was shocked anew each time the crisply surveyed, neatly kept world he so cherished rose up to confront him with all its essential sloppiness, irrationality, and bad business sense"(454). Although the story offers no evidence that Sonny has physically abused his wife, he often seems less than sensitive. She must resort to a series of strategies to distract him from the sports page after he comes home from work and she wants him to look at the water damage in the sunroom and backyard. Later when he raves to the police about his possessions at risk from the intrusive water, his daughter and even his dog come before his wife on the list--although she is placed before the backyard fence.

27 The fact that both husbands' favorite drink is Vodka perhaps hints at an underlying similarity between the two men. He may not have struck his wife physically yet, but Sonny's behavior becomes violent once he sees the falling fence, emerging earthworms, and his whole backyard turned into a muddy swamp in the middle of a heat wave. In his sudden assault on Muriel's house, Sonny "stalked up to the front door and pounded like the Gestapo"(454). Meg tries to calm her husband down as the "hammer of his fist...rose and fell in savage rhythm"(454). When Muriel finally opens the door and Sonny takes in the ruined plaster, warped floors, and general devastation, Meg can see in his bulging eyes that the "willful destruction of a domicile" was "more than he could handle"(454-455).

28 But early in the story the alternating point of view reveals that Muriel Burgess is trying to destroy not property as much as all traces of the life she endured at the hands of her cruel husband. Like the dirt that allows Miss Dent to "wash her hands" of Blake in "The Five-Forty Eight," the running water in Boyle's story signifies another ritual of cleansing and purification. Even after two weeks, Muriel feels that her home--sinking or not--"just wasn't clean enough"(457).

29 The wet-dry motif that ripples through the texture of the story links Monty with dryness. After his death, as Muriel absentmindedly scans the cover of a *National Geographic* featuring the "beige and yellow sands of some distant desert," her mind jumps immediately to Monty(451). As the story progresses, Muriel irrationally fears that the neighbors and the police all want to bring Monty back. And when the first police officer does systematically turn off all her taps and sprinklers, Muriel recoils: "no faucet dripped, no sprinkler hissed, no toilet gurgled. It was horrible. Insupportable. In the pit of that dry silence she could hear him, Monty...cursing her in a voice like sandpaper"(457). She needs the sound of the rushing water to "drive down" (448) the arid memory of her husband. Thus shortly after the officers leave, Muriel decides to ignore their warnings and therefore makes the rounds to all the spigots once again.

30 In contrast to the dry, barren motif associated with Monty, the pervasive water imagery as it reflects Muriel's consciousness is often depicted in language whose connotations suggest strength, vitality, and power. In the kitchen, for instance, "a glitter of liquid leapt for the drain" as Muriel "felt the water surge against the porcelain"(448). Later we hear "the musical wash of the tub as water cascaded" over the edge as well as "the quickening rush of the stream in the hallway as it shot like a miniature Niagra down the chasm of the floor vent"(451). Besides power and strength, at times the water imagery even colors Muriel's creative ritual with religious overtones as when the soothing sound of the running water is said to be "pure, baptismal, as uncomplicated as the murmur of a brook in Vermont"(448). Elsewhere she listens as the "water plunged to the floor with a pertinacity that was like a redemption"(451).

31 Meg Terwilliger's thoughts about the invasive water become a bit more ambivalent than Muriel's because initially she protests the damage to her own property. But deeper down part of her begins to sympathize with Muriel, see her as an emblem of her own future, and even appreciate the magical beauty all the water is creating in her neighbor's backyard in the midst of the arid heat wave. As she peeks over the redwood fence separating the two yards, she is "mesmerized" by the fans of water sprinkling through the sunlight over the "glistening" garden "with banks of impatiens, bird of paradise, oleander, and...roses in half a dozen shades"(450). Like the photograph that symbolically links an octogenarian and her young jogging neighbor in a more recent story by Boyle ("My Widow," 86), Meg also projects ahead to the time when she herself might be an elderly widow who would "probably forget to turn off the sprinklers too"(450). Although the two women are ostensibly antagonists, even Muriel seems to recognize a kindred feminist spirit in Meg because when she first sees her at the door, she notices Meg's darkened eye-makeup and confuses her with the main character in a movie about a streetwalker who rises up and kills her pimp and thus liberates all the other streetwalkers in the neighborhood. In varying degrees the streetwalker, Muriel, and Meg have been dominated by abusive or potentially abusive men. Sonny could easily develop into another Monty.

32 A stronger moment of kinship comes later when the officers have escorted Muriel out to the sidewalk to put her in the police car and take her away. She suddenly turns and stares not at her abandoned house but at Meg who is standing nearby. Expecting a vengeful look, Meg sees only sadness as if Muriel were saying, "Fifty years and this is what it comes to"(459). Even more fully identifying with Muriel after she has been driven away, Meg sneaks over to her neighbor's yard in the afternoon and peeks through the window near the patio.

33 Here the story's modulating perspective is physically depicted as Meg peers through the window: one moment looking at the crumbling wet wreckage of the old lady's life inside and the next moment at her own darkened eyes and youthful face in the glass's reflection. Both perspectives merge, however, as she then turns once more to the thriving roses and impatiens to see the "yard as Muriel must have seen it"(459). Engulfed in the older woman's vision, Meg Terwilliger then does what she and Sonny have been complaining about all along: she turns on Muriel's sprinklers. She promises herself that her "experiment" will last only a minute, for "it could threaten the whole foundation of her house. That much she understood." Since this last sentence, which also provides the story's final words, has been previously applied to Muriel two times(448,457), the phrase forms one of the story's dominant motifs as it seals the perspectives of the two women. At this point the story also suggests that Meg's experiment may extend beyond the designated sixty seconds because "M.T." seems to be on the verge of also "understanding" that what truly needs to be assessed more than the "foundation of her house" are the foundations of her life.

34 While Boyle's Meg Terwilliger needs to re-evaluate the basic structure of her existence and establish more independence from her domineering husband (a task Muriel Burgess tried to accomplish with her running-water ritual), and while Cheever's Miss Dent must exact some type of retribution from Blake before her own individuality can begin to blossom again, so too what starts out as the protagonist's job hunt in Tobias Wolff's "In The Garden Of The North American Martyrs" evolves into the more important search for her true identity. Wolff's story focuses on a history professor who is forced to seek a new position when the fine liberal arts school named Brandon College where she has taught for fifteen years closes because of insolvency. She eventually finds employment at a new "experimental" college in Oregon which proves to be unsatisfactory in a number of ways. Three years later, however, she feels her luck may be changing when a former colleague arranges an interview for her at a prestigious college in upstate New York where the colleague now heads the search committee for a job opening.

35 But even before the collapse of Brandon, the protagonist was having identity problems. The fact that we never hear her last name and that her first name--Mary--is so common and unassuming perhaps hint at the loss of individuality she has been experiencing. Her dilemma may have started when a brilliant colleague was fired because he expressed views of which the Board of Trustees disapproved. To safely avoid the rebellious teacher's fate, she ignores hateful cliques and rivalries, cultivates a humorous persona, and becomes a type of school mascot. From books and records she memorizes jokes and comedy routines at which people laugh and groan, and after a while "the groans became the point of the jokes"(124). She also takes on harmless projects like bowling and organizing a society to restore the good name of Richard III.

36 The gradual loss of the protagonist's true identity is reinforced by what might be called the "disappearing motif": Mary keeps losing things. For instance, a friend tells her she should use some liner on her eyebrows: "they sort of disappear and the effect is disconcerting"(130). More problematic than her eyebrows, she is also losing her hearing and with passing years must use a hearing aid. This problem reflects on an even more serious loss--she is losing her own words, that is, her own voice. She has spent too much of her life listening to others and not enough time speaking out and expressing her own views--as in the case of the fired colleague whose ideas she shared but for whom she did not sign the protest list. This reluctance to speak her own mind affects her very job as a

professor because in order to avoid saying something outrageous, she painstakingly writes out all her lectures which consist largely of other people's ideas and even their exact words: "Her own thoughts she kept to herself, and the words for them grew faint as time went on; without quite disappearing they shrank to remote, nervous points, like birds flying away"(123).

37 At times Mary becomes acutely aware that she is disappearing. Just as Cheever uses the furniture store window to reflect on Blake's shallow life and Boyle employs the shifting perspective of the patio window to help Meg penetrate the emptiness of her existence, so does Wolff use a similar device to push Mary to a moment of startling self-awareness. Once when she is listening intently to a senior professor, she notices a reflection of herself in a nearby window with her ear only inches in front of his talking mouth. She is repelled by the sight and later reflects that her hearing aid and increasing deafness probably resulted from her "always trying to catch everything everyone said"(124). Mary's disappearing eyebrows as well as the loss of her hearing and her own "voice" all suggest that if she continues distancing herself from the core of her being, she may ultimately fade right out of existence.

38 Even in her job at the "experimental" school in Oregon she is losing the sense of teaching at a real college: the school is located all in one building where "bells rang all the time" and the library situated next to the band room had "no librarian and no books "(125). The damp climate which produces toadstools behind her refrigerator causes respiratory problems and generally makes Mary feel as if she is "rusting out" like one of those cars elevated on blocks in one of the local front yards. Mary knows that everyone must die but feels that she is "dying faster than most"(125). Thus three years later when a former colleague writes her about the job opening at the prestigious college in upstate New York, she sends her vita and publications and agrees to fly three thousand miles across the country for a job interview.

39 Since Mary's colleague is a woman and also the Chair of the otherwise all-male search committee, one might feel that Mary has an edge in penetrating the "old-boy network" sometimes found in these renowned schools. But a stroke of ominous foreshadowing suggests otherwise: the book that made her "friend's" scholarly reputation was a study of Benedict Arnold. And from the outset the former colleague named Louise is depicted as a self indulgent, inconsiderate person who wouldn't think twice about betraying another woman. As soon as she meets Mary, she dominates the conversation with her melodramatic personal life, which has recently been complicated by a lover named Jonathan about whom her husband and children have for some unfathomable reason proven to be less than enthusiastic. On the night before the interview she leaves Mary alone in a guest cabin to be with her lover but returns and rudely wakes her up several hours later to complain about the fight she has just had with Jonathan. And worst of all she had neglected to inform Mary that after the interview Mary will be expected to deliver a sample lecture to an assembly of students and faculty. Since Mary seems too nervous to improvise, Louise offers her own unpublished article on the Marshall Plan as a type of apologetic gesture. Mary realizes that such an overt act of plagiarism would represent a type of final "disappearance" of her true identity but considers doing it anyway because, to a lesser degree, she has been borrowing other people's words and ideas for years.

40 Her interview proves to be a disaster: her two books with uncracked bindings lie unread on the table; the entire committee shows up twenty minutes late; and the conversation

focuses on the department chairman's boyhood in Utah. But even before the interview Mary had begun to understand what role she had been picked to play when Roger, the student guide of her campus tour, boasted of how the previously all-male school now allowed women as both students and faculty. He even pointed out the college's liberal statute that stipulates there must be at least one female candidate for every job opening. When Mary finally confronts Louise with her realization that she has no chance of getting the job and is merely satisfying a rule, Louise acknowledges the situation and explains that she picked Mary as the sacrificial victim because her own personal life had become depressing and she had hoped that her old wise-cracking colleague would cheer her up.

41 In this third person narration, Mary is the center of consciousness. We learn what the other characters are thinking from what they say or do. It is crucial that the anonymous narrator has the power to explore Mary's thoughts and emotions because she has trained herself not to express her inner self and thus we would be unaware of the insecurity she feels as she gradually disappears. If the narrator did not reveal Mary's mind, the readers would see only her humorous persona and not any of the anxiety behind the mask. Here Mary and Louise are almost polar opposites. While Louise has lectured her children about the importance of always considering the other person's point of view and cannot understand why they are refusing to do so in the case of her lover Jonathan, she seems hypocritically incapable of applying the same standard to herself. She doesn't pause to consider ahead of time that her husband and children's reaction to her new lover might in some way be negative but merely complains that "they aren't taking it well"(127). Instead of such wanton neglect of the other person's perspective, Mary has spent most of her life worrying too much about what other people think. Since she habitually suppresses her own point of view, we need the anonymous narrator to reveal it to us.

42 Like Cheever and Boyle, Wolff employs symbolic imagery to help portray his characters. Mary's vulnerability is suggested when she is linked to two deer caught in the headlight of Louise's car as she drives Mary through a wooded area on the way to the college: "Their eyes lit up and their hindquarters tensed; Mary could see them trembling as the car went by"(127). Later after she wakes Mary up in the middle of the night, Louise comments to Mary, "You're trembling"(130), without worrying too much about the reason. The association between the startled deer and the rudely awakened job candidate is reinforced by looking at an earlier version of the story where Mary was still "trembling" but the deer were "shaking"(in *Prize Stories* 109).In the final version the use of "trembling" for the frightened deer as well as the nervous job applicant makes the author's connection between both potential victims more emphatic.

43 Another metaphor that helps elucidate both character and plot is the machine. Mary's hearing aid suggests that in some ways she is becoming less human and more mechanical as she tries to take in everyone else's words and then let them pass out of her again in lectures that reproduce the words of others. During her stay in Oregon all the moisture sometimes makes her hearing aid short out and she must bang the control box against her leg to make it work. The dysfunctional machine becomes an objective correlative for her mind which has also become "impaired" by her heavy reliance upon the thoughts of others.

44 Mechanical imagery also informs the scenes where the search committee tries to trick Mary into passing through the machinery of a sham interview. At the same time the student guide is showing Mary the school's "power plant," he informs her of the college's supposedly liberal statue requiring one woman candidate for every job opening. At this

point the previously chatty student becomes "reverent": "It was clear that for him this machine was the soul of the college, that the purpose of the college was to provide outlets for the machine. Together they leaned against the railing and watched it hum"(132). Like one of the little parts of this huge dynamo, Mary soon realizes that she is but an insignificant cog in the mechanism of the college's theoretically liberal procedures. The dynamo represents the true power of the college and she feels its full force as she understands that the whole interview process amounts to nothing more than a mechanical ceremony devoid of any real meaning or hope.

45 During the tour she also learns that a philosophy of power had been incorporated into the very origins of the institution. The motto on the Founders Building reads "God helps those who help themselves." Mary notes how many of the school's male graduates had vigorously followed this precept: "They had helped themselves to railroads, mines, armies, states; to empires of finance with outposts all over the world"(131). Remaining true to form, the protagonist keeps such subversive thoughts to herself, but in the story's final scene her character changes dramatically and like the person in the nursery rhyme, "Mary, Mary" becomes "quite contrary" as she tells how a different type of garden grows. At Louise's urging she agrees to continue with the charade and give the sample class, but she feels that she would "rather die"(134) than read the canned lecture. And, of course, one of the main points of the story is that if she had read Louise's paper as her own, Mary--as a free thinking, independent woman--would have died.

46 Instead of the lecture on the Marshall Plan, the "guest speaker" travels much further back into history as she reminds the packed assembly that they are now sitting in a structure that used to be one of the Long Houses or "ancient domains" of the Five Nations of the Iroquois. Throwing all caution to the winds along with Louise's paper, she then launches into a searing account of the ferocious savagery this tribe inflicted on weaker tribes they plundered and various captives they brutalized. With one gruesome detail after another, she describes the torture of two Jesuit missionaries who were martyred by the tribe: Jean de Brebeuf and Gabriel Lalement. After the barbarians poured pitch on Lalement and set him on fire, de Brebeuf rebuked them and preached to them. In response, the Iroquois cut off his lips and shoved a burning iron down his throat. To the great consternation of the committee members, Mary adds to the list of atrocities, saying, "When he continued to preach to them they cut strips of flesh from his body and ate them before his eyes. While he was still alive they scalped him and cut open his breast and drank his blood"(135). Just before the chief tore out Brebeuf's heart, the martyr tried to preach to them one last time.

47 Here Mary has run out of facts and would have remained silent as the history chairman has jumped up and ordered her to do, but just at that moment she hears someone whistling in the hallway, "trilling the notes like a bird, like many birds"(135). The image echoes the earlier reference to her words almost disappearing "like birds flying away"(123). The symbolism could hardly be more explicit: the birds have returned; her words have come back; Mary has found her own voice once again. The professor of history takes an imaginative leap into the mind of the earlier North American martyr and adjures both the seventeenth-century and the twentieth-century audience in the Long House to: "Mend your lives....You have deceived yourself in the pride of your hearts and the strength of your arms. Turn from power to love. Be kind. Do justice. Walk humbly"(135).

48 Through her blistering historic account Mary is actually throwing back at the search committee an image of its own cruelty. The symbolic imagery identifies members of this group with the savage Iroquois in various parts of the story. At the airport, for instance, Mary says otherwise but thinks Louise looks "gaunt and pale and intense. She reminded Mary of a description in the book she'd been reading of how Iroquois warriors gave themselves visions by fasting. She had that kind of look about her"(126). Also in the lecture hall with the professors from the committee sitting in the front row near Mary, we find that "The sun poured through the stained glass onto the people around her, painting their faces"(134). In this surrealistic tableau brutal savages merge with callous committee members as both groups proceed to inflict pain on their sacrificial victims. Just like one of her Jesuit predecessors, Mary is for all practical purposes being burned at the stake: "Thick streams of smoke from the young professor's pipe drifted through a circle of red light at Mary's feet, turning crimson and twisting like flames"(134). Besides that gaunt warrior-chief look on her face, Louise is also linked with fire by several references to her chain smoking (127, 130), and when she leads Mary into the guest cabin, Louise says, "Look, they've laid a fire for you"(129).

49 But what is really being burned at the academic stake in the Long House lecture hall is Mary's old safe persona. And replacing it like a phoenix rising from the ashes of an earlier century's martyrdom, a fierce protagonist emerges with a bold new voice. Showing that she is tired of listening to everyone else and then mechanically repeating their words, she waves back to the protesting Louise and then turns off her hearing aid "so that she would not be distracted again"(135). As the ironic tones of the first part of the story have been transformed into the brazen defiance of the last scene, Mary develops into a dynamic character whose timid, cautious earlier self has developed into a strong new woman undaunted by criticism or censure.

50 Thus three male authors have entered a "mutual room" and have created authentic female characters with Miss Dent, Muriel Burgess, Meg Terwilliger, and Mary. Whether it be the subjugating earth in Cheever, the cleansing water of Boyle, or the purifying fire of Wolff--all three writers have employed strong elemental imagery to state the case for these women who have struggled to gain a sense of identity and independence in a society dominated by men.

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NOTES

1. See, for instance, *The Journals of John Cheever:* 286,288,290,217, 254, 346-347; *The Letters:* 270, 276, 280, 329, 338; or Donaldson's biography: 305, 313, 328.

2. Boyle studied under Cheever in the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1973(Donaldson 274) and later praised his mentor numerous times: Donaldson 351; http://www.tcboyle.com/faq.html; and http://www.tcboyle.net/interviews.html. Tobias Wolff edited and dedicated to John Cheever a short story anthology called *Matters of Lifeand Death.* Although he didn't know him personally, Wolff regards Cheever as a "literary hero" whom he describes in an interview as "one of my mentors, and he's somebody I continue to learn from--not just in terms of his technique and his language, but in his rejection of that easy cynicism that so many writers display as a sign of their sophistication. Cheever's enormous appetite for life is evident in nearly every sentence he wrote"(*Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 117, p.496).

ABSTRACTS

John Cheever, T. Coraghessan Boyle et Tobias Wolff sont bien connus pour leurs oeuvres qui se cristallisent autour de protagonistes masculins, comme l'illustrent "The Swimmer" et "The Country Husband" de Cheever, ainsi que "Greasy Lake" de Boyle ou encore "Hunters in the Snow" et This Boy's Life de Wolff. C'est certainement en réaction à la prévalence du thème masculin que ces auteurs ont été déboutés par nombre de critiques féministes après avoir été soumis à leur examen.

Cependant, il ne faudrait pas céder à la tentation de classer ces auteurs de manière hâtive dans des typologies trop restrictives. En effet, une lecture attentive de leurs écrits révèle que nombre de récits seraient en mesure de susciter une réaction positive dans les rangs de l'intelligentsia féministe.

Trois nouvelles, en particulier, usent des techniques qui corroborent des thèmes chers aux féministes. Dans "The Five-Forty-Eight", Cheever brosse le portrait d'un patron obséquieux qui, au lendemain d'une nuit passée avec sa secrétaire, la licencie. Celui-ci ne souhaite pas s'encombrer d'une liaison qui pourrait semer le désordre, dans le cours tranquille de sa petite vie confortable. Boyle nous raconte dans "Sinking House" l'histoire de deux femmes au foyer que l'âge, le physique et le comportement semblent en tout point opposer. Elles partagent néanmoins l'expérience commune d'un mari abusif ou potentiellement abusif. Enfin, dans "In the Garden of The North American Martyrs", Tobias Wolff nous décrit comment à la suite d'un entretien, une candidate à un poste de professeur d'université, apprend de manière fortuite que ses chances de réussite sont bien maigres et qu'elle n'est là que pour satisfaire les quotas que la parité impose.

Les stratégies narratives de ces nouvelles ont pour effet de provoquer chez le lecteur une empathie pour chacun des personnages féminins qui se débattent contre la domination masculine et l'injustice, dans des scènes sous-tendues par des images ritualistes de la terre, de l'eau et du feu.

AUTHORS

RICHARD C. KANE

Richard C. Kane is Associate Professor of English at the Mont Alto Campus of Pennsylvania State University. A graduate of Villanova University, he received his M.A. and Ph.D. from Temple University, where he focused on modern British and American literature. Dr. Kane has published a book called *Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, and John Fowles: Didactic Demons In Modern Fiction*. He has also published scholarly articles on James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, Flannery O'Connor, and Bruce Chatwin. Professor Kane is a member of the Iris Murdoch Society and the Modern Language Association